

August 23, 2022
Detroit, Michigan

Thank you Chairman Khanna, my Representative Tlaib, and the Members of the Committee on the Oversight and Reform. My name is Pamela McGhee and I live a few blocks south of major polluting industries that I will talk about today: US Ecology Detroit South, a hazardous Waste Facility and the now closed Detroit Incinerator, Detroit Renewable Power.

I want to acknowledge that there are a great number of Environmental Justice issues in Detroit. There are many facilities in the city that are major sources of pollution that contribute to Detroit's poor air quality; and whose impact is wreaking havoc on the health and environment of Detroiters. They are all environmental injustices, and my hope in giving this testimony is to share more information about experiences of these facilities in my community.

My parents bought their house in 1954 before these facilities were built. The freeway, the Detroit Incinerator, US Ecology, and GM's plant were built a mile away from my family's home. I believe that the cause of this is from red-lining, as racism forced my family to share our neighborhood with polluting facilities and industry of all kinds. There were no protections for my family then and there are little to no protections now.

When the incinerator was first planned, my mother was living just a half a mile south of it. Environmental Justice people were coming around warning us of the health problems that this plant will cause and protesting in front of it every day. Sometimes neighborhood folks would join in. The first summer they built the plant, mushrooms were sprouting everywhere, in everyone's yard. It was weird. Wayne State University went out and collected samples of the mushrooms, but no one ever told us what they found.

My family and I have been around here most of our lives and we all have suffered really badly from asthma living here. When my oldest daughter Jonique was coming home from school, then 16 years old, she had a terrible asthma attack at the bus stop nearby and someone took her to a hospital. That day the incinerator was going strong. Jonique is in her 40's now and still has bad asthma attacks, infertility issues, and fibroid problems. The city and state regulatory agencies have done little to address our continued health concerns.

In my community, our kids regularly miss school because of asthma attacks caused by these facilities. We have more hospitalizations because of asthma than anywhere else in the state of Michigan. These polluting facilities affect the people so badly and for so long.

My neighbor who lives a half a block from US Ecology has C.O.P.D. and Asthma and can't go outside. She has to close all her windows and has a breathing machine in her house. She takes a lot of medications and has lived there for over 30 years and says nothing is getting better.

My mom had breathing difficulties and people in the Diggs Apartments nearby have passed away from asthma attacks including kids my daughter was friends with. Many infants have died from asthma or suffered with lifelong asthma. Many old people died of bad hearts.

My oldest has fertility issues, my youngest has hormone issues. A lot of young women living in the Diggs Apartments and throughout my community have issues getting pregnant, or losing a child too early, and they are all located in this area. Just this last month: one of my neighbors developed seizures, another neighbor lost her pregnancy to fetal brain deformities, and I went in for an MRI because of difficulties myself. This is 2022, why is this so? How are our leaders addressing this?

I want you to know what we face here as an Environmental Justice community, as these issues are not openly spoken about yet they are the same issues that many other Environmental Justice communities face. They are hard to prove cause, yet these problems are in higher concentrations throughout the US in communities like mine and need federal protections.

We deserve better protections for our women, our youth, and our future generations. My mom said all this pollution is killing us, yet we weren't paying attention to these facilities back then. Now, we can see how it really is harming us. It has affected us a lot. Over the years you figure out where these medical conditions come from. Why is it that the place my family has committed to, invested in, and raised family in is not protected like the other communities throughout this state?

Here are some suggestions for policy changes that I have for you:

1. Strengthen state and federal agencies' power to regulate the harmful behaviors of these industries and protect our communities by shutting down facilities that continue to pollute us after issuing multiple violations and consent decrees.
2. Increase their fines for violations.
3. Create mandatory community engagement measures when communities have been wronged.
4. Require facilities to have a cumulative impact analysis of the community's health along with the current pollution already emitted.
5. Do not allow permits for any facility that will bring greater harm to overburdened communities.

For example, one of our most harmful impacts from regulatory agencies not doing their job is from the EPA. The EPA failed to regulate incinerators as they are legally obligated to do so according to the Clean Air Act. This inaction exposed my neighbors and family to unnecessary risks while our incinerator operated until 2019. Our facility shut down from years of advocacy calling out leaking staks and nearly 1000 odor and clean air violations.

Yet, if the EPA would have done its job to strengthen regulations in 2006, it would have saved so many lives.

In 2020 our small 8 by 6 block neighborhood association, located one mile downwind of the Detroit incinerator, lost over 22 members to COVID. Even though our facility shut down, the lack of regulations for this facility caused a lifetime of respiratory and cardiovascular problems that my community still lives with. COVID hit us hard because the EPA did not do its job regulating facilities like these, causing us to breathe in small particles of trash. If the EPA were to have regulated incinerators 16 years ago, we may not have lost so many of our neighbors. This inaction is killing my neighbors and other residents in communities like mine throughout the USA.

The EPA is currently legally obligated to review and revise standards for incinerators every 5 years under the Clean Air Act, but the EPA has repeatedly failed to update these standards, increasing cancers, asthma, and heart problems to my friends and family. These regulations are vital to protecting neighboring communities from dangerous incinerators. It's indefensible to let polluting facilities operate any longer without stronger and more meaningful oversight of dangerous operations. Communities like mine have been waiting far too long for updated regulations and no community can afford to wait any longer.

More on Incineration as a False Solution:

Incineration is a waste treatment technology that involves burning commercial, residential and hazardous waste. Incineration converts discarded materials, including paper, plastics, metals, and food scraps into bottom ash, fly ash, combustion gasses, air pollutants, wastewater, wastewater treatment sludge, and heat. 30% of all waste that goes into an incinerator comes out in the form of toxic ash that is not currently regulated as hazardous.

Our incinerator in Detroit was one of the worst polluters in Wayne County for criteria pollutants. It emitted nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and lead into the atmosphere – pollutants toxic to human health. Nitrogen oxides and sulfur dioxide both contribute to the formation of ozone which is harmful to respiratory health. In addition, the toxins emitted by the incinerator are particularly harmful to children's health. Particulate matter emissions contribute to Detroit's high asthma hospitalization and death.

One of the greatest health concerns attributed to the incinerator is asthma. Detroit has the highest rate of asthma in children among America's big cities and Asthma hospitalization rates in Detroit are 3x higher than anywhere else in the state of Michigan.

While in operation, over 3,300 tons of garbage was sent to the incinerator daily. Incinerators emit more carbon dioxide per megawatt-hour than coal-fired power-plants. Since much of the CO₂ emissions come from combustion of biomass materials like paper,

food, and wood waste; we can reduce these emissions along with many others if we implemented a city-wide decentralized and multiscale composting plan.

Incinerators are often located in overburdened Environmental Justice communities and burn tons of plastic per year. It is important to remember that the fossil fuel industry is causing harm from the time the oil is taken out of the ground to the time these single use plastic products end up in landfills or burned in an incinerator. What's worse is that these billion dollar industries think that pyrolysis and gasification, also called *chemical recycling*, can stop our plastic problem by burning it. That just creates another problem with our health that the fossil fuel industry does nothing to address. These chemical recycling industries that heat plastics to make fuel need to be regulated as incinerators.

Burning plastics does not solve our plastic problem, it makes the health of our communities and the environment worse. If these facilities are not more strictly regulated, they will continue to increase cancer risks in young women like my friend Emily who just had a mastectomy at age 38, because she lived near this incinerator and breathed in the hormone altering burnt-plastic pollution that illegally leaked from our stacks for years.

I urge you to make waste incinerators, chemical recycling technologies, and the frontline communities living near them a top priority by following the regulations that are listed within the Clean Air Act and create regulations that actually protect us and not the profits of these polluting industries.

Thank you for allowing time for me to speak and share my experiences with you today,

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Detroit, Michigan
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